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ABSTRACT

Findings of a study of the attitudes, values, educational achievements, and life goals of U.S. college freshmen are summarized. The study report, "The American Freshman: Twenty Year Trends, 1966-1985," is based on the Cooperative Institutional Research Program's annual surveys of college freshmen. Major findings from the study point to significant changes in students' academic skills, in their preferences for college majors and careers, and their personal goals since 1966. The women's movement dramatically affected career choices, behavior, and attitudes and values among students entering college in the 1970s and 1980s. Findings suggest that the widely-discussed conservative political and social mood on college campuses really reflects a rising tide of materialism coupled with student concern about an uncertain economic future, rather than strong support for conservative political and social policies. In the area of majors and careers, the data show a migration away from the traditional liberal arts fields into more occupationally oriented majors. Health-related behaviors (e.g., smoking) and sex differences in career aspirations are also reported. (SW)

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COOPERATIVE INSTITUTIONAL
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American Council on Education/University of California, Los Angeles

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COOPERATIVE INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH PROGRAM



American Council on Education/University of California, Los Angeles



NEW REPORT TRACKS 20 YEAR SHIFT IN FRESHMAN ATTITUDES, VALUES AND LIFE GOALS

The past 20 years have witnessed dramatic shifts in the attitudes, values, educational achievements and life goals of American college freshmen, according to a new report issued by UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute (HERI). Major findings from the study point to significant changes in students' academic skills, in their preferences for college majors and careers, and their personal goals since 1966. The report documents the dramatic impacts of the Women's Movement on career choices, behavioral changes, and attitudes and values among students entering college in the 1970s and 1980s. It also suggests that the widely-discussed "conservative" political and social mood on college campuses really reflects a rising tide of materialism coupled with student concern about an uncertain economic future, rather than strong support for conservative political and social policies.

"We are fascinated by the complexity of the changes revealed in the 20 annual freshman surveys and by the possibility that these trends might be explained in terms of larger political and social forces," says UCLA Professor and Institute director Alexander W. Astin.

The report, *THE AMERICAN FRESHMAN: Twenty Year Trends, 1966-1985*, summarizes the results of the Cooperative Institutional Research Program's (CIRP) annual surveys of college freshmen. The CIRP is the nation's largest and oldest empirical study of higher education. Each year roughly 280,000 college freshmen at some 550 two- and four-year colleges and universities across the United States participate in the annual CIRP freshman survey. Since 1966, nearly 6 million students, some 100,000 college faculty, and more than 1,250 institutions have participated in CIRP surveys.

The freshman data document the much-discussed decline in academic skills among American college students. In 1985, two of every five freshmen (40.5 percent) indicated that a "very important" reason for deciding to go to college was "to improve my reading and studying skills," up from 22.2 percent in 1971. Similarly, the proportion of freshmen who anticipate needing "tutoring in specific courses" has nearly doubled over the past 10 years, from 6.8 percent in 1975 to 11.2 percent in fall 1985. Finally, today's students are less inclined than students of the 1960s to rate themselves "above average" in academic ability compared to their peers.

Despite the downward trend in self-assessed academic competency, the freshman data show that students' high school grades have increased significantly over the past two decades. Whereas in the late 1960s students with C averages outnumbered those with A averages by better than two-to-one (31.6 vs. 12.5 percent in fall 1969), by 1978 the A students actually outnumbered the C students (23.3 to 17.3 percent). Grade inflation peaked in 1978 and has declined slightly since then. However, students are well-aware of grade inflation: half of the fall 1985 freshmen (50.1 percent) agreed that "grading in the high schools has become too easy."

Even with the decline in academic skills over the past 20 years, the freshman data reveal that slightly more students aspire to advanced study beyond the bachelor's degree in 1985 than in 1966. However, these increases have occurred exclusively in the high level professional areas, essentially the medical and legal fields. Student interest in the doctoral degree declined 12 percent between 1966 and 1974; although it has increased in recent years, it is still below the levels recorded in the first four years of the survey. "Although the worst of the decline in student interest in doctoral programs may have passed," says Astin, "these lowered levels of student interest in doctoral training portend continuing troubles for many graduate programs in years to come. Moreover, the declining interest in the doctorate, coupled with an 85 percent decline in the proportion of freshmen interested in faculty careers since the late 1960s, suggest that the nation's colleges and universities will soon begin to experience real staffing problems as large numbers of current faculty begin to retire in the 1990s."

In the area of majors and careers, the CIRP data document a migration away from the traditional liberal arts fields into more occupationally-oriented majors. Business has emerged as the number one major and career choice of today's freshmen. In fall 1985, almost one freshman in four planned to major in business (24.8 percent), up from 14.3 percent in 1966. Similarly, the proportion planning to pursue business careers more than doubled during this same period, from 11.6 to 23.9 percent. In this case as in many others, the increases for women were more dramatic: the proportion of women planning business careers has increased by over 500 percent since 1966.

Student interest in humanities majors experienced a significant decline over the past 20 years. English majors dropped by over three-fourths, from 4.4 to 1.0 percent between 1966 and 1985. Other humanities fields experienced similar sharp declines. Freshman interest in mathematics and physical science majors also fell during this period: mathematics majors declined by more than four-fifths (from 4.5 to 0.8 percent), and physical science majors fell by half (from 3.3 to 1.6 percent).

Education experienced the greatest decline of any career field. Between 1968 and 1985 there was a three-fourths decline in the proportion of freshmen planning to pursue elementary or secondary teaching careers (from 23.5 to 6.2 percent). Interest in professional careers declined 73 percent during this period, from 1.1 to 0.3 percent of the entering freshmen. As elsewhere in the freshman data, sex differences are significant: in the late 1960s, upwards of 40 percent of the women entering college intended to pursue careers as elementary or secondary teachers, compared to less than 12 percent of freshman men; in fall 1985, these comparable figures were 9.6 and 2.6 percent, respectively.

"There is little doubt that the declining popularity of school teaching was brought on in part by the widely publicized oversupply of school teachers during the mid-1970s," (see p. 2)

says Dr. Kenneth Green, associate director of HERI and the CIRP. "The oversupply, coupled with the declining status of teaching and low teacher salaries, prompted many students, particularly women, to explore other career options, especially business careers." However, Green notes that since 1983 the freshman survey has shown some renewed interest in teaching careers: "The current wave of educational reform, coupled with rising teacher salaries and good long-term job prospects, has helped to make teaching careers attractive again to many students."

"The sex differences in changing career aspirations also reflect the effects of the Women's Movement," says Prof. Astin, "a conclusion reinforced by practically all other sex differences we find in our data. Indeed, perhaps the most dramatic changes in all the freshman data since 1966 are those that reflect the effects of the Women's Movement and the changing role of women in American society. These changes are reflected in dramatic shifts in intended majors and careers, behavioral changes, and changing attitudes and values."

Some of the most important changes in student behavior since 1966 involve health-related behaviors. The percentage of freshmen who frequently smoke cigarettes has declined by about half between 1966 and 1985 (from 16.6 to 9.1 percent), while the percentage reporting that they frequently or occasionally drink beer increased almost one-fourth over the same period (from 53.5 to 66.5 percent). Although freshmen men and women are less likely to smoke cigarettes now than in 1966, the pattern of decline has been dramatically different among the sexes. Smoking among freshman men has dropped by two-thirds over the past 20 years. Among women, smoking actually increased during the 1970s before starting to decline in the 1980s. Consequently, by 1985 the women entering college were almost twice as likely to smoke as men (11.3 vs. 6.6 percent). Between 1966 and 1985 beer drinking increased among both men and women, although the rate of increase was greater for women.

The survey data do not support the recent and widespread publicity about the growing "conservatism" of American college students. "Since 1970, the percentage of entering freshmen who identify themselves as politically conservative has been fairly stable, about 15-20 percent," says Astin. "The real migration in student political attitudes has not been from left to right but from "liberal" to "middle-of-the-road." The proportion of entering freshmen identifying their general political position as liberal declined from 36.6 to 22.4 percent between 1970 to 1985, while the middle-of-the-road group increased from 45.4 to 56.7 percent during the same period (and peaked at 60.3 in 1983).

Despite the substantial drop in the proportion of students identifying themselves as politically liberal, other data point to very strong student support for an array of traditionally liberal political and social positions. By large majorities, 1985 freshmen support national health insurance (60.5 percent), increased taxation for the wealthy (73.3 percent), a larger government role in both consumer protection (62.4 percent) and environmental clean-up efforts (78.0 percent) and are against increased defense spending (73.2 percent). Additionally, the majority (54.9 percent) support legal abortion, feel that the government is not doing enough to promote disarmament (66.0 percent), and endorse school busing as a vehicle for promoting school integration (54.4 percent).

Although generally supportive of traditionally liberal causes, freshmen have become increasingly conservative on some issues. Between 1969 and 1983, the proportion of freshmen who agreed that "there is too much concern in the courts for the rights of criminals" rose from 54.3 to 68.8 percent. Similarly, student support for abolishing the death penalty has been weakening (from 53.9 percent in 1969 to 26.6 percent in 1985).

Student values and life goals have also shown dramatic shifts. The item showing the strongest upward trend is "being very well-off financially." Over the past 20 years student

endorsement of this value has increased dramatically from 43.8 percent to 70.9 percent of the entering freshmen. In contrast, the value showing the most precipitous decline involves "developing a meaningful philosophy of life." Although men are still more likely than women to endorse the value of being very well-off financially, the gap between the sexes has narrowed considerably since 1967. Declines in student commitment to "developing a meaningful philosophy of life" are only slightly less for men than for women.

"While we can only speculate about the reasons for the contrasting patterns for these two values, it is possible that they reflect a common underlying shift in student values over the past decade," says Astin. More specifically, it could be argued that acceptance of the goal of making a lot of money obviates the need for some students to develop a 'meaningful philosophy of life.' Indeed, it may be that some students view making money as a kind of 'philosophy of life' in itself."

Astin adds that changes in other value questions reflect similar trends. Most of the values items on the annual freshman survey showing large increases in recent years are concerned with money, power and status: being very well-off financially, being an authority, having administrative responsibility for others and obtaining recognition. Fall 1985 freshmen are much more likely than students in the early 1970s to say that a major reason for attending college is "to be able to make more money." Similarly, they also are almost twice as likely as 1966 freshmen to want to "become an expert in commerce and finance" (25.9 vs 13.5 percent). In contrast, values showing the largest declines involve altruistic activities and social concerns: helping others, promoting racial understanding, cleaning up the environment, participating in community action programs, and keeping up with political affairs. Creative and artistic goals also showed declines during this period.

"These contrasting patterns of value changes are very consistent with the changes we observed in student majors and career plans," says Professor Astin. "Increased student interest in career-specific majors such as business has been accompanied by rising materialistic and power values, while decreased student interest in education, social science, the arts, humanities, nursing, social work, allied health and the clergy is reflected in declining altruism and social concern."

Copies of the report, titled *THE AMERICAN FRESHMAN: Twenty Year Trends, 1966-1985*, are available for \$19.00 from the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA.

The Cooperative Institutional Research Program

The Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) is a national study of American higher education. Begun in 1966 by the American Council on Education, the CIRP is now based at the Higher Education Research Institute in UCLA's Graduate School of Education, with the continuing support of the Council.

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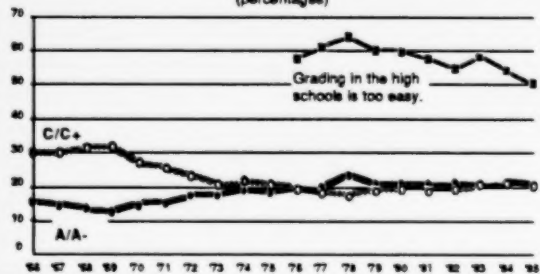
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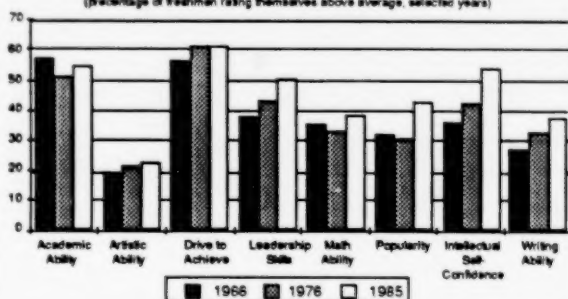
FRESHMAN SURVEY DATA

Trends in High School Grades Among Entering Freshmen
(percentages)

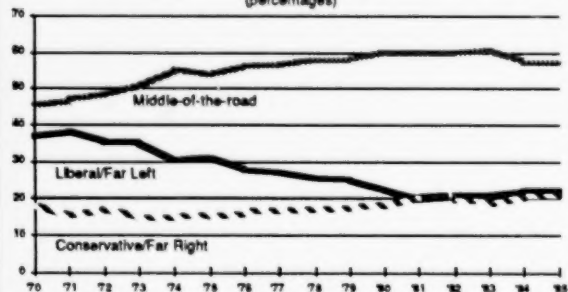


Student Self-Ratings

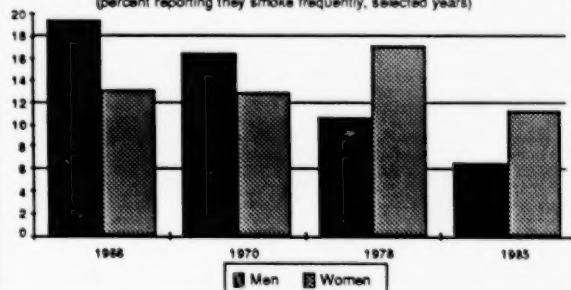
(percentage of freshman rating themselves above average, selected years)



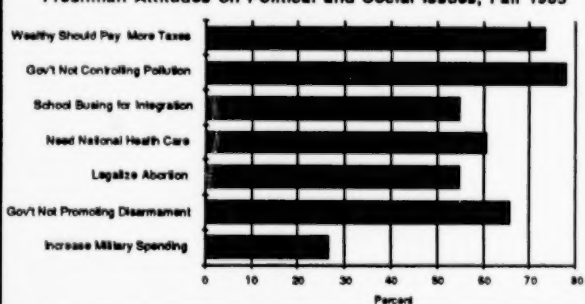
Shifts in Political Identification Among Freshmen, 1970-1985
(percentages)



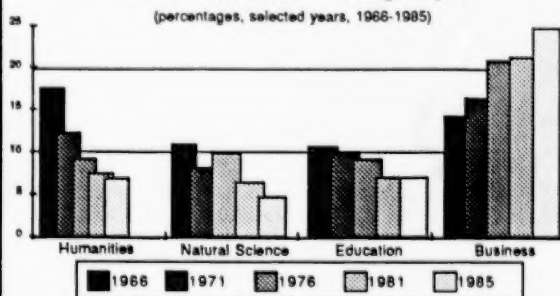
Trends in Cigarette Smoking Among College Freshmen, By Sex
(percent reporting they smoke frequently, selected years)



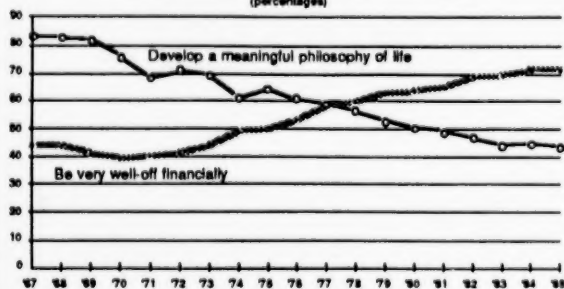
Freshman Attitudes on Political and Social Issues, Fall 1985



Trends in Preferences for College Majors
(percentages, selected years, 1966-1985)



Changing Freshman Life Goals, 1967-1985
(percentages)



Trends in Career Preferences
(percentages, selected years 1966-1985)

